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Global grassroots resource governance networks: opportunities and challenges for re-conceptualising multi-level governance architectures

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Top down attempts to create more sustainable societies worldwide have faced many difficulties (Bosselmann, Engel & Taylor 2008). Global issues concerning natural resources and climate change are characterized by major complexity, uncertainty and a lack of successful government action at higher levels. Therefore it is not surprising that various kinds of actors are making attempts to find alternative environmental governance structures.

One of these alternatives is the international Transition movement. As a response to global environmental change and globalisation, initiatives like Transition Towns started to arise during the last decade. These initiatives focus on a transition at the local level from patterns of consumption that are dominant in the West to a new way of living in which sustainability and local resilience are key. The Transition Network is a network consisting of Transition Towns within existing communities and other Transition Initiatives that originated in the United Kingdom but has more recently seen a world wide spread - more than a thousand initiatives are connected to the Transition Network globally. Transition Towns focus by their own account on a local transition in which the community concerned makes itself independent from fossil fuels and other aspects of an unsustainable global economy. Transition Towns want to tap into the local community as a source of resilience and creative innovation to reach this goal (Hopkins 2008). The Transition Network offers a potential alternative to top-down natural resources governance that is gaining attention. Anthony Giddens recently named Transition Towns as one of the positive forces towards a more sustainable planet during Planet under Pressure, an international conference in London during which the focus was on finding solutions for global challenges in sustainability¹. According

¹ Presentation Anthony Giddens at Planet under Pressure: <http://view6.workcast.net/?pak=2103510620841073&cpak=5876441157257134>

to Giddens the future for a responsible and a sustainable interaction with the earth lies in networks of bottom-up initiatives like Transition Towns.

Grassroots globalisation provides an alternative

Transition Towns and other bottom-up initiatives arise in a world which is characterised by globalisation. According to Inda and Rosaldo globalisation can be understood as ‘a speeding up of the flows of capital, people, goods, images, and ideas across the world, thus pointing to a general increase in the pace of global interactions and processes; (..) an intensification of the links, modes of interaction, and flows that interconnect the world; (..) a stretching of social, cultural, political, and economic practices across frontiers so as to make action at a distance possible; (..) a heightened entanglement of the global and local’ (2008: 11). However, the typical idea of globalisation being a top down process with a homogenising effect on cultures (Caldwell & Lozada in Ritzer: 2004) is being challenged. A growing number of examples show globalisation as something other than a standardised one way process. Anna Tsing looks at globalisation as ‘a set of projects that require us to imagine space and time in particular ways’ (2000: 351). According to Tsing, researchers are making the same mistake with globalisation as they have done in the past with modernisation: it is a common practice to view globalisation as a standard set containing the same effects for every individual where ever he or she may be. Tsing therefore argues for viewing globalisation as multiple globalisms. In this way we are able to get a better understanding of the processes that accompany globalisation and at the same time have eye for interactions between local and global level.

The Transition Town movement is an example of these multiple globalisms. It does not make sense to characterise these initiatives as anti globalisation because this would be based on the dominant and limited view of globalisation being a top down process only. We would rather call Transition initiatives an alternative to globalisation, and to be more specific, label it as grassroots globalisation. Arjun Appadurai (2000) introduced this concept to interpret different social manifestations that are seeking to counterbalance perceived negative consequences caused, in one way or the other, by globalisation. By means of ‘globalisation from below’, ‘a series of social forms has emerged to contest, interrogate, and reverse these developments and to create forms of knowledge transfer and social mobilisation that proceed independently

of the actions of corporate capital and the nation-state system (and its international affiliates and guarantors)' (Appadurai 2000: 3). In the case of the Transition Town movement this term refers to a local answer to global challenges where local initiatives are connected to a global network.

Transition Towns offer ways in which people try to cope locally with issues earlier mentioned surrounding sustainability, related to consequences that processes like globalisation have on societies and individuals. In this context Zygmunt Bauman (2011) characterises our current society as a liquid modernity. According to Bauman Western states have withdrawn themselves to make room for neoliberalism and the free market in the present consumer society. In this consumer society, claims Bauman, we give substance to our morality through consumerism. Bauman argues in his book *Collateral Damage* (2011) that there are no more grand ideologies in current times. According to him the list with 'social ills' shows that 'the idea of the pursuit of a good life and happiness being a self-referential business for each individual to pursue and perform on his or her own is an idea that is grossly misconceived' (2011: 38/39). The sense of community and interconnectedness is nowhere to be found in our liquid modernity where individualisation is rampant and everyone is responsible for his or her own happiness. Anthony Giddens (1990: 4) argues in *The Consequences of Modernity* that 'the modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order'. And with the disappearance of old community structures people are starting to look for new forms of being together with others.

Initiatives like Transition Towns arise in this global liquid context, in a world where time and space between cause and effect are growing longer and bigger. Confusion and insecurity about causes and responsibility for negatively influencing nature, environment and quality of life can have a paralysing effect,. This can especially be the case in a society in which people have a tendency towards individualisation and where there are no clear effective channels for community responses as an answer to global issues concerning sustainability. The Transition Town movement tries to create community responses on a local level and attempts to create and work towards a more local daily life. In this way connections related to livelihoods and consumption become shorter so people can experience the consequences of production

processes; and initiatives actively work on social transparency through democratic decision making.

As mentioned by Giddens at the Planet under Pressure conference (2012), Transition initiatives can play an important role when it comes to bottom up responses to global problems including climate change. These local initiatives, united in a global network, seem to succeed where governments and other top down organisations are making frantic but often unsuccessful attempts in guiding and inspiring people towards a more sustainable way of living. Considering the broad scope of challenges when it comes to sustainable top down governance, academic and societal interest in these type of grassroots answers is growing.. Up to now research within Transition initiatives has mainly focused on practical or technological dimensions of this movement (Seyfang & Haxeltine 2012). But it is also important to gather knowledge of social dynamics in these type of bottom up initiatives and to learn more about drivers of people involved who try to live their life within existing communities in an alternative way. However, social scientific research on Transition Towns has been scarce up to now. Seyfang and Haxeltine (2012) have done quantitative research using questionnaires portraying a broad view of perspectives in the Transition Network. However this quantitative research did not look into motivations and social dynamics of participants involved in this movement in a more in depth way. Kenis and Mathijs (2009) did provide more in-depth perspectives but focused on Transition Towns from a political science point of view and focused mainly on the political impact of the movement. The qualitative research this paper is based on provides insights in the daily social practice and underlying ideological drivers of actors involved in one of the over a thousand Transition initiatives worldwide.

Transition Town Lewes as a case study

This paper is based on an ethnographic study of one of the Transition initiatives, Transition Town Lewes, and its context from February first 2012 till May second 2012. Qualitative methods used were participant observation, in-depth interviews and a participatory workshop with the research participant involved. Transition Town Lewes (TTL) is one of the longest running initiatives (after Transition Town Totnes) in the Transition Network. Actors involved with TTL want to shape their lives in a sustainable way in a world where processes connected

to globalisation have a lot of influence. The group calls itself a ‘community response to the challenges of climate change and the end of cheap oil. Since early 2007 hundreds of Lewes people have been getting together to discuss ideas and put them into action’². The aims of TTL show the importance of a sustainable way of living and also a responsibility that actors within TTL want to take.

The initiative based in Lewes consists of different subgroups³, each focusing on different aspects concerning climate change and the end of cheap oil. The name Transition Town may give the impression that the whole town of Lewes is involved but this is not the case. TTL consists of people who live in and around Lewes but not everyone living in Lewes participates in TTL. Over 900 people who have signed up for the mailing list which TTL sends out regularly, however according to actors involved this number also contains a lot of people who just want to stay informed about TTL and their events. The mailing list for active actors counts approximately one hundred people, which is a number that is more of a true reflection of the number of people who regularly participate in one or more of the different groups. Twenty of the active actors participated in this anthropological study, aging from 30 till 65. The group can be characterized as somewhat above average standards of wealth (though there is some diversity) and several of them have an academic background. The informants participate in TTL mainly through activities and meetings organized by the different subgroups. To preserve anonymity for all the participants of this research project, those quoted in this paper have been assigned fictional names.

This research project focussed on ideological and social dynamics in within TTL using anthropological concepts. Amongst others, we have identified personal motivations and drivers in research participants from an ideological perspective. For this purpose I use of a classical notion of ideology derived from Clifford Geertz (1973) as well as a more recent notion from Joshua Lockyer (2007). Using the underlying individual ideologies as a point of departure, this paper will then look at the community level. Communities like Transition Town Lewes enable people with overlapping ideologies to connect and subsequently express and put their ideologies into practice. But, as this paper will point out, the relationship

² <http://www.transitiontownlewes.org/about.html>

³For an overview of the different subgroups we refer to the appendix.

between ideology and community is a complex one. The specific shape the TTL community has grown into will be analyzed. The basis of this analysis will be a classic definition of 'community' (Cohen 1985) which will be combined with the concepts 'intentional community' (Brown 2002), 'light community' (Hurenkamp & Duyvendak 2008) and 'network' (Castells 2010). Subsequently the interaction between ideology and community in the context of TTL will be discussed, where we identify friction and an aspect of liminality as characteristic for TTL. A reflection on the relationship of the initiative with its broader context will illustrate why grassroots initiatives like Transition Towns, and more specifically, Transition Town Lewes take shape the way they do.

Ideological drivers in Transition Town Lewes

In the context of this paper the concept of ideology is used to interpret personal motivations and drivers because these can contain social ideals and a wish in fulfilling these social ideals. It will become clear that ideologies present within TTL are characterized by a longing for interconnectedness and also, the tension that exists between ideologies and world view of involved participants works as an incitement for putting ideologies into practice.

Actors involved with TTL have ideals and ideas about a not (yet) existing world. The Transition Town movement has a strong ideological side, and this makes ideology a useful and analytically interesting concept to interpret TTL. Nevertheless this doesn't mean that actors see their ideologies as a societal norm that they want to force onto others. Actors involved with TTL create their own personal ideology using all kinds of sources, making them bottom-up ideologies. These personal, non-normative ideologies form a stark contrast when one looks at the way how ideology is characterized in other definitions - as a concept which has implicit ideas about a one and only truth (Freedman in: Tower Sargent 2009: 8/9). Definitions like these aren't helpful in this context because research participants don't see their ideology as the one and only truth. In order to analyze the concept of ideology in a meaningful way, it is important to take social and psychological contexts in which ideologies arise also into account (Geertz 1973). Ideologies and world views present in TTL are a reflection of the current era which is characterized by globalization and modernization. Therefore we use a specific theoretical perspective on ideology in this paper, seeing it as a fluid concept which is subject to change because it is formed in a specific social context.

Existing ideologies among actors involved in TTL can be characterized as ideologies with an (increased) environmental consciousness and a strong feeling of connection with the earth. Ideas similar to authors like Van Egmond (2011), Gerzon (2010) and Siebenhüner (2000) can be recognized in these ideologies. Tim Ingold's plea from his book *Being Alive* (2011) is also strongly present in ideologies of research participants. According to Ingold we have to start seeing ourselves as an integrated element of our environment again, not see the environment as a disconnected context through which we simply move. Ingold argues that we have to see the world as a 'meshwork': 'a tangled mesh of interwoven and complexly knotted strands. Every strand is a way of life, and every knot a place' (Ingold 2011: 151). This view is clearly reflected by research participants, as this quote of participant Stephan will show: "So once individuals realize that, they don't see their lives consisting of certain psychotic aspirations like having a bigger house, having as many cars, having a swimming pool, going on holiday three times a year to the Maldives. Because all those actions are separating us from the natural world, separating us from each other as human beings. And they are increasing the unsustainability of life and future generations." This illustration of part of the ideology of Stephan is characteristic for the research participants in this case study. In this we can recognize both an aversion of consumerism as a dominant discourse as well as a longing for an interconnectedness and interdependence between human beings and nature which from an anthropological point of view can be characterized as Ingoldian.

Ideologies focusing on interconnectedness that were expressed on an individual level by actors involved with TTL exist in a paradoxical relationship with another important ideological element dominant in the Transition movement: local resilience (Hopkins 2008; 2011). Local resilience as a concept is more dominantly present in internal and external communication of TTL as a collective, as for example could be observed during meetings of the different groups. Local resilience as a concept is less present in individual expressions of ideology, especially when it is compared to interconnectedness as an ideological theme. Because resilience of a community in the view of the Transition Network focuses on the ability to withstand the impact and influence of outside forces like peak oil and climate, this specific view offers a different perspective than the more radical interconnectedness which has been described by individual actors. Where an Ingoldian interconnectedness could be an

incitement and encouragement to cultivating positive connections between a community and the rest of the world, ideology concerned with local resilience mainly calls for empowerment of and focus on the local level. Because the local resilience ideology that plays a role in TTL is more aligned with the ideology of the Transition Network, it can be seen as more dominant in external communication. As a result ideologies dominant on a more individual level, focussing on inclusion and interconnectedness, are less explicitly conveyed. This contributes to the focus of TTL, which is mainly on the local level. This is a relevant observation because it influences the potential of grassroots initiatives like local Transition Towns: global system thinking, which is inherently part of ideologies focussing interconnectedness, is less expressed while this could contribute in creating stronger connections between local Transition initiatives and their (global) context.

The emergence of ideologies focusing on interconnectedness which were strongly present in participants of this research can be understood when looked at recent history. At the end of the fifties and sixties the demise of dominant ideologies appears to have started, something that is also characterized as the exhaustion of ideology (Tower Sargent 2009: 9). According to Tower Sargent the two world wars, numerous smaller wars and the rise of communism and fascism as new ideologies can be identified as causes: 'One response to all this was an attempt to escape from ideology into objectivity' (Tower Sargent 2009: 9). In the rise of many new visions on the world, which according to Tower Sargent can be seen as ideologies, democratic capitalism can be recognized as well (Tower Sargent 2009:11). Tower Sargent argues that there is a struggle amongst ideologies where it comes to political and intellectual levels and that 'the ideological map is more complex than ever' (Tower Sargent 2009: 11). Zygmunt Bauman (2011) states that major ideologies don't exist anymore in our current society and this creates a situation in which some people start to look for new frameworks in terms of an ideology so that they are able to give meaning and substance to their lives. This offers a more contemporary perspective on prior analysis of ideology by Clifford Geertz (1973), according to whom ideologies arise and are shaped during times of change and insecurity.

For the purpose of this paper it is useful to combine Bauman's notion concerning the end of major ideologies and the by Tower Sargent mentioned complexity with Geertz his view of ideologies as a symbolical expression of responses to social turbulence. From a perspective

of these combined visions ideologies of research participants can be viewed as a subjective and diverse reflection of our current society, which according to Giddens (1990: 6) is characterized by change that is increasing in scope and pace.

World views within Transition Town Lewes

When one would compare ideologies to visions on the current state of the world dominant amongst actors in TTL, one can notice that these two are complete opposites of each other. According to Geertz a world view is a 'way of thinking about the world and its workings, which is common amongst particular groups' (In Rapport & Overing 2000: 395/396). Where ideology captures an ideal image, world view shows a subjective perspective on the current world. An example of the world view communicated by Transition Town Lewes can be found on their website:

'Here's the thing: we're running out of the cheap oil and gas that we all depend upon to heat our homes, cook, run our cars, and so much more. On top of that we have climate change affecting water levels, soils and eventually our food supplies. So how do we - as a community - prepare for a future with a changing climate, and depleting fossil fuels and resources?'⁴

This fragment mainly emphasizes the non-sustainable character of our current society. This world view is also dominant amongst research participants. Bauman explains this type of world view as follows:

'Consumers turning to the commodity market in search of satisfying their moral impulses and fulfilling their self-identification (read, self-commodification) duties are obliged to seek value-and-volume differentials, and therefore this kind of "consumer demand" is an overpowering and irresistible factor in the upward push' (Bauman 2011:81).

⁴ <http://www.transitiontownlewes.org/about.html>

During one of the many interviews that were conducted during this anthropological study, Diana who has been involved with TTL for some time now talks about her world view: “I think we created this world where it is really easy for us to not see what the consequences of our behavior are. And that we lie to ourselves. Because we have created this technology that allows us to lie to ourselves.” Diana’s experience of modern lifestyles can be summarized by the notion of ‘delayed feedback mechanism’, a notion which Tim Ingold writes about in his book *Being Alive* (2011). Globalization is, according to David Harvey (1989), accompanied with time space compression, which causes social realities to disconnect from physical realities in which natural resources play an important part for example. Local social realities are also being disconnected (Giddens 1990). As research participant John describes: “There is a huge lack of understanding of results of individual actions of people. But also particular actions, where people are actually exploiting resources in ways that are simply not sustainable.” The delayed feedback mechanism is a characteristic element mentioned in the described world views dominant amongst actors involved with TTL.

When looked at ideologies and world views existing among participants, the interconnected ideology with environmental consciousness is the complete opposite of the world view where delayed feedback mechanisms are able to cloud people’s judgement and effects their relationship with the natural environment. It is possible to say there is a discrepancy between the current state of the world and ideologies of participants. A solution for the tension generated by this discrepancy can be found by individuals in alternative lifestyles that initiatives like TTL offer so participants can put their ideology into practice. Stephan explains: “We all have a role to play in making the world better and stopping it from getting worse. I personally feel an obligation very that is deep rooted, I can’t stop the impulse to participate in what I feel are projects that bring people to an understanding of their relationship with the natural world.” Actors involved with TTL want to work together with others towards more alternative ways of living in the light of climate change, peak oil and other challenges encountered in a world characterized by globalization. Participation in Transition Town Lewes provides research participants with ways to cope with discrepancy and friction they experience between their world views and their ideologies. Anna Tsing (2005: 4) describes ‘friction’ as ‘awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interaction across difference’. Processes during which encounters between extremes cause

friction can according to Tsing be constructive as well as destructive and creative. It speaks for itself that ideology isn't the only explanation for social change but interpreting this friction between ideology and world view can provide us insights in drivers of actors and shine light on their individual participation with TTL.

As described earlier, TTL provides actors with possibilities for taking matters into their own hands and not being dependent on (local) governments for example. Because of this emancipating characteristic Sarah, a participant who has been involved with TTL since the beginning, describes this Transition initiative as 'counter hegemonic': "What we are trying to achieve is make what difference we can in the sort of environmental, climate change and peak oil terms, as much difference as we can to make our community resilient locally. Because I feel it is like: it is the government up there, and lots of people trying to influence the government and that will come from top down and we are doing it from bottom up." Louise's ideology, which is also characteristic for other research participants, describes the idea and feeling that actors are able to help create changes that they so long for but which they do not see taking place through bottom-up action because: "things have always been done by small groups of people making changes, that is how everything in the world has changed", according to participant Nina.

Transition Town Lewes as a community

Now that we have looked into ideological drivers dominant in TTL, the next focus will be on the community aspect. A surprising statement by Eve, one of the long time participants in TTL, was the following one: "I actually feel embarrassed when someone asks a question about TTL. We pretend we are a more powerful, cohesive community. But all that does is alienate people from TTL. We are not a cohesive community, we are separate groups. So we must not pretend we are but appreciate what we did and what we are and not fight it." Groups in TTL are also diverse in character. "The groups are very different," says Sarah, one of the more active actors who is involved with different subgroups. "A lot of people like dipping their toe in and do the odd bit. When they have got a little bit of space in their time and lives. The Energy Group is just really practical, down to earth kind of people. They don't follow any group rules or anything like that. Every meeting there is a whole different crowd. Whereas Heart & Soul has a more dedicated following. The Food Group is a bit small and needs some new energy." Each subgroup has its own character and its participants each have

their own level and way of engagement. Karen, who has been involved with TTL from the beginning, tells during an interview that she doesn't see TTL as a very social group: "we don't really socialize that much together. We have meetings. Some people socialize together and have friendships but we haven't created a social culture." Nevertheless, when one looks more closely at social interactions within TTL there is a form of social culture to be discovered. This form is 'communitas' which can be described as 'a great social solidarity, equality, and togetherness' (Turner in Kottak 2011: 287). Communitas existing within TTL arises partly through shared ideologies and a longing to fulfill these ideologies and put them into practice in a group context. Expression and cultivation of this communitas however is limited by a lack of social cohesion within TTL, as is illustrated by statement of Eve at the beginning of this paragraph. Social cohesion is 'the extent that the social relations of its members hold it together. The "forces" and "bonds" that hold a group together are the social relations among members of the group, and cohesion is an emergent property of the relational pattern' (Moody & White in Rolfe 2006). According to Eve at the level of TTL there is little social cohesion, but at the level of the different subgroups this doesn't apply. Where it concerns social cohesion, Transition Town Lewes has resemblances of a set of stronger and loose connections between different groups and actors. Some of the subgroups are characterized by a feeling of communitas and some are characterized by a culture of practical actions where the main focus is on projects. As a result TTL has characteristics of a network which is composed of smaller communities where communitas to a greater or lesser extent can be found in each.

The tension between independence and community in TTL is characteristic of such movements. Our current society being a 'liquid modernity' where lifestyles lead by individualization and consumerism seems the complete opposite from feelings of interconnectedness which are clearly present in actors involved with TTL. Although this liquid lifestyle is part of the dominant discourse, Bauman (2001: 144) argues that we are still longing for a form of community in this context. With the disappearance of old community structures as earlier said we start to look for new ways of being together. This new context carries a longing for security offered by community but this is challenge by a strong longing for personal freedom (Bauman 2001: 5). 'Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom. Security and freedom

are two equally precious and coveted values which could be better or worse balanced, but hardly ever fully reconciled and without friction' (Bauman 2001: 4/5). This dance between security and freedom can be observed in Transition Town Lewes. To get a better grasp of the type of community, we are therefore going to look at TTL from complementary perspectives, namely intentional community, light community and network.

Some characteristics of TTL as a community ask for further interpretation because the concept 'community' as defined by Cohen (1985) does not fully encompass them. Examples are the loose connections between different actors and the different subgroups. As mentioned earlier these loose connections exist within a context of *communitas* and social cohesion where actors involved often have similar ideologies. Because of this we want to characterize Transition Town Lewes as a 'light intentional community'. This concept is a combination of three different existing concepts, namely intentional community, network and light community and tries to explain the community form of TTL in the light of the current *zeitgeist*.

The concept 'intentional community' will form the basis for the interpretation of TTL as community. Interactions between community and ideology come together in the 'intentional' of intentional community. This specific form of community can be characterized as:

'1. a deliberate coming together; 2. of five or more people not all of whom are related; 3. to live in a geographic locality; 4. with a common aim to improve their lives and the broader society through conscious social design. These communities 5. involve some degree of economic, social and cultural sharing or cooperation and 6. some degree of separation from the surrounding society' (Lockyer 2007; Miller 1999, 2009 via Lockyer & Benson 2011:3).

According to Lockyer and Benson (2011: 3) intentional communities provide a setting where 'people taking increasing control of their lives and livelihoods by explicitly attempting to transcend the dominant discourses, policies, and forms of rationality that purportedly point the way to the good life for the masses but often do not actually lead there'. When one would use the criteria mentioned above to look at Transition Town Lewes, one can notice a couple

of similarities and some differences. TTL is a group of more than five actors who intentionally come together (point 1 and 2). Common goals of TTL focus on actors improving their own lives as well as lives of people in the wider community through a more sustainable lifestyle and involvement with TTL. The conscious choice for a non-hierarchical organization of TTL allows people to put their ideologies into practice (point 4 and 5). TTL is located in a specific geographical location (point 3), however it is not a case of a physical form of separation from the surrounding society (point 6) because TTL is formed by a group of people within an existing community. As previous paragraphs in this paper on ideologies within TTL point out, there is a separation, figuratively speaking, from the rest of the broader Lewes community caused by these specific ideologies apparent amongst actors. When one would regard TTL as an intentional community, the definition of Lockyer and Benson mentioned above is be used in a different way of analysis (when it comes to the physical separation) for a more open interpretation so that the concept ‘intentional community’ can be applied on cultural forms that arise in the current era.

Intentional communities are not a new phenomenon and so there are specific periods in time, including the sixties and seventies, where there could be an increased societal interest detected in these cultural manifestations. Economic geographer Berry (1992 via Lockyer & Benson 2011: 3; via Andelson 1998: 15) connects the increased interest in intentional communities (in the United States) with economic crises and social consequences that these entail. Ideologies of actors involved with TTL also reflect discontentment caused by economic crises. ‘Increasingly, these communities focus on creating more sustainable livelihoods and building networks of social capital by reconnecting with people and the places they live in’ (Lockyer & Benson 2011: 3). Attempts to establish new forms of society can therefore be seen as dissatisfaction with ‘the competitive world of industrial capitalism and their yearning for what all intentional communitarians seem to seek: a more cooperative, more caring, and less materialistic social order’ (Andelson 1998: 11).

Community with no strings attached

Although we have identified Transition Town Lewes as a intentional community, two adjustments are needed to understand the shape the community of TTL has taken when seen from the current zeitgeist. For the first adjustment we would like to cite the concept of ‘light

community' Hurenkamp & Duyvendak 2008. Light communities are, according to Hurenkamp and Duyvendak, 'social groups with which an individual can disconnect without serious consequences'. In this not so radical form of individualization, Bauman (2001) recognizes a (individual) desire for safety (offered by a community) which characteristic for the current era we are living in. TTL can be seen as a form of community in which actors can organize themselves in an informal way while offering a safe space for participants to put their ideology, which can be seen as of collective importance, into practice. As we have said earlier, the different groups out of which TTL exists are very different from each other, and willingness to participate differs from actor to actor. Any actor can willingly initiate (or participate in) a project or a new group, nothing is obligated allowing for a certain level of freedom. Nevertheless, this specific characteristic also contributes to the current low level of energy existing amongst involved research participants, but we will return to this specific topic later on in this paper. Important characteristics of 'light communities' according to Hurenkamp and Duyvendak, are in line with this. Actors are: 'to a reasonable extent free to leave, are free to commit to individual judgement, are free to give voice to their opinions but these light communities are effectively contributing to a high level of predicable behavior, to the emergence and continued existence of groups that are in many ways homogeneous' (Hurenkamp & Duyvendak 2008: 3). This specific community form is fueled by 'individualization discourses, empowerment ambitions and radical modernization analysis according to Hurenkamp and Duyvendak (2008: 3).

To help analyze and characterize TTL, the second concept added to the meshwork of 'intentional community' and 'light community' is a complementary form amongst modern communities, namely their aspect as networks. According to Manuel Castells (2010: 500) networks represent 'the new morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture'. Although these types of communities know a long history, Castells believes that the network is a characteristic form that societies take in the current era. A network is a set of interconnected nodes: 'a node is the point at which a curve intersects itself. What a node is, concretely speaking, depends on the kind of concrete network of which we speak' (Castells 2010: 501). When one would consider TTL as a network, the network can be seen in the different actors involved who are connected, where some actors have more

connections with other when more social relationships exist between people. A network can also be seen in the different subgroups and how these are connected with each other. According to Castells (2010: 501/502) we should consider social structure based on networks as 'a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance'. This network morphology could also work as a source for a dramatic reorganization of power relations. According to a number of research participants TTL can be considered as a network. Hannah, a long time participant of TTL who was involved right from the start explains the way of working within TTL as follows: "Our principles are all based on working in a networked organization as opposed to a hierarchical one. So we are all learning, we don't need to ask permission, we do stuff that we are passionate about basically. People join in and if someone says: 'ooh I really want to do this', we say 'right, just do it'. And there is also a strong philosophy in that we don't say 'you ought to do this' or 'we ought to do this'. It is really about owning responsibility." The democratic organization and the networked structure provide actors with a context in which they are able to actually take this responsibility. There is an active search for alternatives to dominant power structures, in which everyone's voices have the same weight. TTL offers actors' freedom in the level of their participation places responsibility right in their own hands. But with this freedom in participation the actual responsibility is not always taken according to different research participants in the current, relatively low energy in TTL.

The network-like relations between the different subgroups of TTL and the actors involved point towards a community where there is space for different people to put ideologies into practice. The loose network on which this community is based also provides individuals with the personal freedom people so long for these days according to Bauman (2001). TTL offers a clear structure where actors can act at their own desire because everyone involved is able to initiate a project in this non-hierarchical structure. Nevertheless, a discrepancy exists between ideologies focusing on interconnectedness of actors involved with TTL and everyday practice of TTL which can be characterized as a network in which according to various research participants there is no strong social cohesion.

In this form we can recognize a social structure in which individualism, participation/freedom of choice and flexibility are reflected. Transition Town Lewes can therefore be characterized

as a combination of an intentional community and a light community with characteristics of a network, being a ‘light intentional community’.

Community and ideology: against the stream

Now that we have looked into the individual ideological and community levels of TTL, the next step is to take a closer look at the interaction between these two. TTL is an initiative that wants to create sustainable change within an broader existing community but by striving towards this goal are going against the stream of the much louder dominant discourse. This going against the stream causes friction, a friction that can be seen as a product of interactions between ideologies and social dynamics. The next paragraphs focus therefore on this friction which arises out of interactions between ideologies and the social reality of community in order to analyze the current phase⁵ of TTL and to identify challenges a light intentional community has to deal with. During this research project we have identified a number of sources of internal friction in TTL which contribute to the current relatively low energy phase. Central in this is the interaction between a number of actors who carry out and embody their ideology stronger than most actors involved with TTL. If TTL would serve as an example of a ‘light intentional community’ the question arises of how different sources of friction can lead to challenges for a community like this one during different stages of development.

One stage in development which is characteristic for intentional communities is schismogenesis. ‘Schismogenesis implies a breach between subgroups within community, a true falling apart’ (Andelson in Brown 2002: 135). Actors involved with TTL have initiated the process of schismogenesis themselves pretty soon after the formation of TTL with the formation of different subgroups. This process initially seemed to have a positive effect because individuals were (and still are) able to interpret and put their ideologies into practice within TTL to their own taste. But although this networked structure offers a way to put ideologies into practice, the light aspect of the concept light intentional community seems to cause a lacking in drive for actors to participate.

⁵ For an overview of different phases of development of TTL we refer to the appendix.

Another aspect which we have to take into account to understand the current state of TTL is the fact that this group has been running for five years now. Actors who are involved with TTL for a long time now say they experience 'Transition' as a much more difficult process than they originally thought. In the movie 'In Transition 2.0' one of the research participants talks about this as well: 'It has been a difficult process for us. Nobody should go into this with any kind of illusions about the amount of effort, commitment and time it takes'. This difficulty has an impact on the research participants: "I think there is a little bit of a burn out. People did at the beginning offer to do all sorts of things and then they realized how much work that that required, so now they are cautious about doing it because they got a bit exhausted," explains Alexander, one of the research participants who has been actively involved with TTL for over a number of years. The period with conflicts mentioned earlier in combination with the difficulty of the Transition process results in actors being careful with the amount of time they commit while avoiding new conflicts. The result is a community in which the focus lies on practical matters, but complicating this is an overall relatively low level of energy amongst those involved to carry out these practical matters.

Within this context friction arises between ideologies of actors and TTL as a community. When it comes to putting ideologies into practice, a majority of our research participants share the same point of view: 'we do what we can, we do our best, we try to do as good as possible'. Various research participants state that they are not always able to live their daily life as they would like to live their life in their ideal world. Time and energy are often important factors in this: a lot of people involved with TTL simply don't have more time or energy to invest in TTL, although a lot of them does want to do this. Sarah, one of the research participants, said that she was giving herself a hard time about this for quite a while: "But I have decided to be a bit more relaxed about it and stop making life quite so hard for myself. Because it is quite a bit harder to make sure you do all those things, both financially and physically." Ideologies of involved participants therefore don't always strictly correspond with their practice. For example, a number of participants do their grocery shopping at regular supermarkets, even at supermarket chain Tesco, where like in a lot of other supermarkets products are available which don't have a local origin at all and therefore can be seen as having a negative impact on the planet. "Don't tell anybody that we have been to Tesco!", said one of our research participants when we noticed a plastic bag of the supermarket chain in her kitchen. The image that TTL has and ideologies of involved actors

don't always correspond with their actual behavior: "And right now there are only a few people for whom TTL feels like an absolutely major dominant part of their life. They are full time Transition. I would say there are probably a lot more like me who are semi transitioners, fitting it around a very conventional way of living," tells Nina, who has been involved with TTL for over two years now. The difference in the level of willingness to participate in TTL is something that can give rise to criticism from one actor on others, something that is also contributing to friction within TTL. It is not hard to imagine that with a community form like TTL being an light intentional community there is space for an unbalance between actors when it comes to willingness to participate compared to other intentional communities where constant presence in a community that is separated from 'the outside world' potentially asks for a higher level of participation.

Because willingness to participate in TTL being a light intentional community is determined by actors themselves, this gives rise to a situation in which more dominant and more actively involved actors (can) put the focus on their own interpretation and execution of ideologies. When actors put the focus in a particular way on certain elements of their ideologies and world views this can cause friction with newcomers as well as existing actors with TTL. As we have observed during this research project, this friction can cause people interested in TTL and even involved actors to turn away. When certain actors carry out their ideologies in a dominant way, this leaves less space for other actors to express their ideologies and to share it with others which is an important aspect in creating a community according to Geertz (1973: 232). As mentioned earlier, TTL as a community communicates an ideology of which the main message does not necessarily correspond with ideologies of individual actors. The ideology communicated by TTL corresponds more with that of the broader Transition Network. The ideology of interconnectedness, which exist among a large number of research participants is not clearly highlighted in external communication of TTL. Involved actors don't formulate and share this often with others and therefore this doesn't become part of the process of symbolic construction and embellishment which plays an important part in creating and keeping a community alive according to Cohen (1985: 21). Because of this TTL isn't able to attract new actors with the ideological interconnectedness, while variations of this particular ideology are an important driver for many of the current actors.

During this research project we detected a strong longing for new participants who would bring new energy amongst current involved actors. This would allow the current actors to put

their ideology into practice: “I think it is partly because of the same old faces. It is because of the same old but very nice people and, you know, it is just hard work,” says Sarah. A different picture is painted by various newcomers, who say that isn’t very encouraging to repeatedly hear ‘we have already tried that’: “All this negativity. They already know everything,” tells one of the more recently joined actors us slightly frustrated.

Friction in a broader perspective

For a deeper interpretation of TTL as a case study, we want to make use of the concept ‘liminality’. Liminality is used in anthropology to interpret processes of passage or transition. Originally this concept was introduced by Victor Turner as part of the rites of passages, or ‘the period between states, the limbo during which people have left one place or state but haven’t yet entered or joined the next’ (Turner in Kottak 2011: 290). One could say that actors involved with TTL are experiencing a liminal phase where they are trying to make a transition to a more conscious and sustainable way of living and to express their ideology in this way. A difference with the collective liminality in classic rites of passage is that the Transition process for each actor involved starts at a different point and therefore Transition isn’t a process that is experienced together as a group from the beginning. This makes it a type of liminality which isn’t experienced as a group process which can cause some difficulties. Turning away from normal economic life or in the case of TTL trying to give economic life a different, more sustainable interpretation, is characteristic for intentional communities according to Lucy Jayne Kamau (in: Brown 2002). Sustainability can be seen as a counter hegemonic discourse (Fernando in Lockyer 2007: 7/8). This conscious choice for a sustainable ideology and putting it into practice makes intentional communities according to Kamau (in: Brown 2002: 20) almost always liminal and members often find themselves in a state of ‘outsider-hood’: ‘conceptually, socially, and physically, they are set apart from normal society with its structured statuses and roles’. This state of outsider-hood is a state that is consciously experienced by research participants. Coping on a local level with non-sustainable global forces is a process that takes a lot of energy according to Stephan: “So the people who are committing to activity that will prepare for change, are really swimming against the tide and that takes a lot of energy. Because the energy of novelty isn’t there and the energy of popular support isn’t there.” To phrase it in a different way: this state is liminality takes a lot of energy from actors involved with TTL.

To overcome the limits of local-led governance and to harness its potential, multi-level conversations with other governance levels (e.g. governments, non-state actors operating on regional, national and international levels) have to be organized. Multi-level governance models such as those discussed by Ostrom (Ostrom 2009) and Cash (Cash et al. 2006) can help conceptualize how other levels of governance could be complementary and supportive of these local initiatives.

Double liminality

In TTL as a case study, one can not discover one but different types of liminality. The first additional form of liminality: as apposed to other intentional communities like eco villages, TTL tries to realize change from within a broader society in which hegemonic discourses are dominantly present. Because of this involved actors are confronted on a daily basis with behavior that does not correspond with their own ideologies: “Friends that were really good friends two or three years ago, some have come along with the philosophy but don’t do much about it. They acknowledge it and say ‘yes I know what you mean but we are going to fly to Singapore to see how our daughter is doing’. And then I think: ‘I might fly to Sierra Leone to see my daughter’. I wouldn’t want to rule that out but it is quite hard to really do. I haven’t been able to do that, not since I have been part of TTL,” as Sophie explains that confrontation with behavior that is not corresponding with her sustainable ideology is a difficult challenge. Nina elaborates on this as follows: “I think it is everyone just trying to do their little bit and not looking to see if it is making a huge global impact. Just going on with it anyway. That is all you can do.” This confrontation with behavior that is conflicting with ideologies of actors involved with TTL causes them not always being able to see the value of and contributions that TTL is making. With the focus being on the local level, actors are not always conscious of the fact that they are part of a grassroots globalization movement and how this is contributing to the bigger picture of sustainability. A case study on a different Transition initiative done by Kenis and Mathijs (2009) shows similar findings at the political level. Focus on the local level in the case of Transition initiatives can work empowering but also counteract or limit them.

The second form of liminality can be found in the Transition process itself. As mentioned earlier, actors within Transition Towns are working towards a different, a more sustainable

lifestyle in order to cope with consequences of climate change and peak oil. In *The Transition Companion* (2011) it becomes clear that Transition is a process without a clear end: ‘You see, we are really making all this up as we go along (...)’ (Hopkins 2011: 79). The fact that Transition is an open-ended process places TTL and other Transition initiatives in a permanent state of liminality (Kottak 2011: 291). As yet there is no ‘end point’ known in the Transition process and in theory the transition can never be completed. Compared to a classic rites of passage the liminal phase is followed by a phase characterized as incorporation but this isn’t the case for Transition initiatives. This double liminality⁶ can be further explained as follows: actors find themselves caught between the dominant society and alternative forms of existence and they are part of the, so it seems at the moment, open-ended Transition process. It is this double liminality in combination with friction within TTL that makes Transition a difficult and challenging process for actors involved.

Conclusions

Transition Towns have the potential to grow beyond their niche and become an influential discourse which arises from the basis of a strong practical reality. When one makes the connection between personal ideologies and expression of these ideologies in the context of a community we can observe friction in TTL between the longing for connectedness and a longing for personal freedom. This results in a form of community for which we have introduced the concept ‘light intentional community’, in which the concept ‘intentional community’ is being interpreted in a different way by disconnecting it from the spatial isolation-requirement.

Social challenges are caused by a double liminality which characterizes the state of actors involved with TTL. There is an ongoing transition to a more sustainable future in combination with moving between mainstream society and niche. The concept of double liminality and the realization of the accompanying friction is not only of interest as a theoretical exploration of light intentional communities in the context of grassroots globalization. These insights can also be useful for actors in communities like TTL: it could

⁶ A concept earlier used by Pisani & Azzopardi (2008) in a different context and a different case study.

initiate a process of becoming aware of challenges and finding ways to cope with these different types of friction and liminality. Actors might be able to see double liminality as a fertile and dynamic situation characterized by change but in which strong connections exist with mainstream society creating a situation in which the bridge between niche and dominant discourse continues to exist.

The insights this paper has provided can therefore be valuable as a perspective to understand the potential and limitations of Transition Towns with regard to various other governance levels. Within TTL as part of the Transition Network and as an example of grassroots globalization, the focus is on the local level. This local focus can work as an advantage because in this way TTL can function as an local example for sustainable discourses and sustainable practices. But as we have argued earlier, the local focus can also be seen as a limitation.

When TTL is seen from a perspective that involves the broader context, what matters is not only the physical difference that actors make by trying to live life in a sustainable way. What also matters is the image that they are sending into the world, to a level that goes beyond the local. By participating on a small scale within TTL actors contribute to a larger movement existing of more than a thousand Transition initiatives which is inspiring people world-wide. Precisely the fact that initiatives like TTL find themselves in a situation characterized by double liminality could contribute to this global influence because many grounded lessons are learned. More importantly, this learning process doesn't take place in seclusion but right in the middle of society. Actors are able to try and turn their ideological interconnectedness into reality and by looking beyond the borders of Lewes make stronger connections with other initiatives worldwide that are working towards sustainability.

The local resilience discourse is a relevant discourse, but it can only do so much up to a certain degree: it offers an alternative to a complex and fragmented world. But the focus on only the local level is, as we've said before, causing limitations. The solution to go beyond this limiting focus lies within reach: ideologies of individual actors are based on a longing for broader interconnectedness and global level. These ideologies therefore have the potential to offer a different globalist discourse that can span from local to national to global scales (Cash 2006: 508). But because of the focus on local resilience and local connectedness in both TTL and the Transition Network, the broader interconnectedness are not reflected or expressed

clearly. At this point therefore upscaling to other governmental levels doesn't take place so much, we can rather speak of 'outscaling': the bottom up-effect up to higher levels stays limited and there is more of a 'bottom, bottom, bottom'-effect with which mainly new Transition initiatives are generated. A more explicit focus on expressing individual ideologies could break this limitation and open the doors to collaborations with other social actors who operate on different levels. However, because the Transition movement is based so strongly on the practical and local, it would be wise to invest in breaking local social barriers preventing participation so that Transition initiatives are also able to transcend the niche character. Based on the findings of this research project we can speculate that expressing ideologies focussing on interconnectedness in a way that is explicit and inspiring and at the same time leaves space for diversity and freedom of practical interpretation would contribute in reaching this goal. Recognition of the double liminality and friction that are part of Transition initiatives because of their structure can furthermore help to overcome local limitations and see the changeability of initiatives as an advantage. These insights can serve members of grassroots globalization initiatives to break through limitations and leverage higher-level governance levels, as well as be valuable for actors operating at those higher levels of governance who seek to harness the potential of such initiatives.

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Appendix

Overview subgroups *Transition Town Lewes*

The following provides an overview of different groups from Transition Town Lewes from which actors have participated in this research project. Although TTL consists of more than the groups mentioned below, these were the most active groups at the time of this research project. For the latest information about Transition Town Lewes please visit <http://transitiontownlewes.org>. For an overview of all the different subgroups, go to <http://transitiontownlewes.org/groups.html>.

Steering Group

‘The Steering Group manages and makes decisions on matters that affect TTL generally, including decisions regarding unallocated funds/donations, broad communications issues, strategic issues, helping groups to work in accordance with TTL principles and agreed procedures, supporting the formation of new groups and providing guidance on current projects to ensure they fit with TTL principles and strategy.

Where decisions are to be made about TTL principles, the steering group will involve TTL Active in proposed changes. The steering group cannot change the system by which the steering group is chosen’. Source: http://transitiontownlewes.org/ttl_steering.html

Subgroups of Transition Town Lewes

Better Banking

‘Discovering more ethical and local investment options.

TTL Better Banking Group started with a session Where Does Our Money Go? in December at which some of us had read [the book](#) of similar name from [New Economics Foundation](#) (NEF). Most people felt that they wanted to move on from realisation of how bad the banking system is now to what we can do locally to build something better.’ Source: http://transitiontownlewes.org/better_banking_group_page.html

L&OVe: Lewes & Ouse Valley eco-nomics

‘There is a group under the TTL banner, called Lewes & Ouse Valley eco-nomics (L&OVe). This group will be looking at the things that the Lewes economy gets for free from the local environment, (things like pollination, water purification, flood protection, nutrient cycling, carbon storage, etc.) but that are already threatened or in decline. We will be trying to identify the most important of these 'services' for the local economy; which local businesses and institutions benefit from them; possibly putting a monetary value on them; and investigating what can be done to help the local economy by enhancing the ecosystems locally that provide these 'services'. We will also be looking at what role the Lewes Pound may have within this process.

It's all about the resilience of the local economy and recognising what the mainstream economy currently doesn't recognise nor put value on, yet actually underpins all businesses and all life on earth.' Source: <http://transitiontownlewes.org/landove-group.html>

Enterprise

'Our vision: We want to see a thriving, resilient and universally beneficial economy in which local people can create secure and fulfilling livelihoods by providing the produce, goods, services and skills that our town needs. Our mission The Enterprise Group encourages and supports local people in establishing and developing enterprises that help to meet Lewes's needs for food, energy, transport and other essential goods and services in a fair and sustainable way.' Source: <http://transitiontownlewes.org/enterprise.html>

Food Group

'We're a group of local people who feel passionate about food. We're also concerned about climate change and peak oil. We want to find ways to make sure Lewes can feed itself in future – in a way that reduces carbon emissions and uses less energy.

What are we aiming to do? Support Lewes in making the change to a low carbon, low energy future at every stage of the food cycle. We believe this means thinking about how to:- farm organically to minimize use of oil - based fertilizers- transport and sell food in a way that reduces carbon emissions- encourage people to buy local food, cook their own food and not throw good food away- make sure everyone gets access to a healthy diet.' Source: <http://transitiontownlewes.org/food.html>

Heart and Soul

How does Heart and Soul fit in with TTL? They offer the following: An opportunity to explore personal and inner change, in response to the outer environmental change at this transitional time.

Safe spaces where people can connect and express through mind, heart and soul, their personal experience in response to the ups and downs of transition. Meaningful events to provide a platform for connection and to build a supportive and resilient community. They're inclusive and welcome people from all walks of life; they're an integral part of TTL and are available as a resource.

INNER TRANSITION: As we undergo who knows what kind of change in the coming months and years, how will we respond mentally, emotionally and spiritually to these changes? And what support do we have as a community that is uniting and accessible to all? In response to these questions, as an on-going initiative the Heart and Soul group hold monthly sessions. (link) They are loosely structured, to create a safe, open and confidential space, so that individuals can share whatever arises from mind, heart and soul, in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance. Everyone is welcome to come along.' Source: http://transitiontownlewes.org/heart_and_soul.html

Companies formed by Transition Town Lewes

Lewes Food Market

Lewes Local Community Interest Company (CIC) is a not-for-profit company with the broad

aims of developing sustainable local food systems and making it easier for more people to buy good, healthy, seasonal food. Lewes Local CIC was established in June 2010, and the Lewes Food Market is its first project.

The Market grew from an idea initially developed by members of the [Transition Town Lewes Food Group](#). The Food Group aims to work towards sustainable food production, supply and access in Lewes District. A market seemed a good way to further these aims, so Food Group members recruited more people to establish the market group, which worked with the support of others such as the Lewes Town Partnership and Lewes District Council to get a market up and running. Source: <http://www.lewesfoodmarket.co.uk/about.html>

OVESCO

‘The Ouse Valley Energy Services Company Ltd (Ovesco Ltd) and OVESCO Limited IPS have been formed by members of the Transition Town Lewes Energy Group. The Energy Group meets regularly to plan events for Lewes and the surrounding area. The aim of both companies is to deliver a range of energy-related projects to the people and businesses of Lewes district, via:

- Running a solar and insulation grant scheme for Lewes District Council - 2007-2012 now completed
- Providing easy access to energy efficiency advice, and motivation to take it up.
- Bulk purchase of electricity from an existing renewable electricity provider and resale to members of the company to generate some income.
- Investigation of local electricity and heat distribution networks for villages and towns within the District.
- (...)
- Developing large-scale community-owned renewable energy projects such as community PV, wind turbines, water hydro and CHP.’

Source: <http://www.ovesco.co.uk/our-vision.html>

The Lewes Pound

‘Essentially the Lewes Pound is a voucher or token, redeemable for goods or services with local traders and anyone that wants to use it. It is complementary to sterling, and by using it, we can all help support local producers and traders and raise awareness of the importance of shopping locally.’ Source: <http://thelewespound.org/>

Different phases history of Transition Town Lewes

Various phases can be distinguished and summarized when one looks at the history of TTL:

- Enthusiasm: from the start of TTL a lot of people were enthusiastic and excited about this new initiative. A lot of people attended the official *unleashing* of TTL at the Town Council in Lewes.
- Development: formation of (the first) subgroups and Steering group.
- Maturing: groups have taken shape, development of TTL has been stable and people involved are more or less a steady group.

- Conflict: period of a year during which different projects like the Food Market and OVESCO turned into independent organizations. Various actors who previously fulfilled an active role within subgroups started to invest more time in these independent organizations. Also, during this time there were different conflicts within TTL which has been described as a painful situation that has had a long aftermath.
- Exhaustion: energy of actors involved with TTL can be described as relatively low. Research participants involved are careful with contributing their time to TTL, for which they see the conflict as one of the main motivations.
- Low energy:exhaustion (partly) caused by conflicts seems to take a hold on TTL, turning Transition Town Lewes more into an organization/network divided in subgroups. Some subgroups are characterized by a sense of communitas, other subgroups more as a practical organization.